

Poetry

Drawer 3A

Recreation

41 2009 NET 03519

Abraham Lincoln and Recreation

Poetry

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

THE SCOTSMAN

Tue 24 Apr 2007

How Rabbie Burns left even great orator Abe Lincoln lost for words

CLAIRE SMITH

HE CARRIED a little leather-bound book of Burns with him in the courtroom and could recite many of his works by heart. But when Abraham Lincoln was asked to encapsulate what Scotland's national poet meant to him, he was almost lost for words.

The American president, and author of the Gettysburg Address, confessed: "Thinking of what he has said, I can not say anything which seems worth saying."

The note, written by Lincoln to the Burns Club in Washington in 1865, was penned in response to a request from the White House tutor Alexander Williamson, a Scot, who asked the president for "the honour of your recognition of the genius of Scotland's bard, by either a toast, a sentiment, or in any other way you may deem proper".

Lincoln's first version reads: "I can not frame a toast to Burns. I can say nothing worthy of his generous heart, and transcendent genius. A. Lincoln."

The second, expanded version, penned beneath, reads: "I can not frame a toast to Burns. I can say nothing worthy of his generous heart and transcending genius. Thinking of what he has said, I can not say anything which seems worth saying. A. Lincoln."

According to an explanatory note, the "grievous cares" of his office prevented Lincoln from attending the Burns night but, on an earlier occasion, the centenary of the poet's birth in 1859, he was said to have attended a celebration when revellers drank "mountain dew" and "a large number of mysterious bottles circulated freely".

Lincoln was introduced to the poetry of Burns as a child by the Scottish-American Jack Kelso and could recite works, including Tam O' Shanter, by heart. Milton Hay, who was a clerk in his Springfield law office, once told a reporter that Lincoln "could quote Burns by the hour. I have been with him in that little office and heard him recite with the greatest admiration and zest Burns' ballads and quaint things".

The official biography of the president, which gave an approved account of his life, said: "When practising law before his election to Congress, a copy of Burns was his inseparable companion on the circuit; and this he pursued so constantly, that it is said he now has by heart every line of his favourite poet."

Such was the president's enthusiasm, he dreamed of visiting Ayr to see the poet's birthplace.

Remarking on the busts of Shakespeare and Burns in his office, Lincoln told James Grant Wilson, editor of Chicago's first literary magazine: "They are my two favourite authors, and I must manage to see their birthplaces some day if I can contrive to cross the Atlantic."



The note to the Burns Club in Washington goes on sale in New York on 22 May and is expected to raise £6,000.

It is part of the manuscript collection of the late publisher Malcolm Forbes, which is being sold in six separate sales at Christie's.

Reflecting the millionaire publisher's lifelong fascination for the handwritten works of United States presidents, the collection includes a draft of John F Kennedy's inaugural address, Lincoln's last presidential address and the opera glasses he was clutching the night he died.

Albert Einstein's letter to Franklin D Roosevelt urging the US to begin research on nuclear weapons and Lincoln's call for former slaves to be allowed to vote were also acquired by the publisher, who was said to have bid at every important auction of historic documents from the 1960s until his death in 1990.

Forbes, whose collection of nine Faberge eggs was sold for £100 million in 2004, said: "A letter penned in the hand of a president is a far better portrait of the man than a photograph or a painting."

The publisher said of his collection: "Documents remind us that these are more than historical figures - they were people pouring out their hopes, sadnesses, reactions and directions on to paper.

"Their letters and documents are what make flesh and blood of key figures in our country's history."

POVERTY TO POWER

ABRAHAM Lincoln was born in 1809 and grew up in poverty in a one-room shack in Kentucky - but became one of America's greatest presidents.

The Republican leader took the United States to victory in the Civil War and helped unite the country at Gettysburg with his call for: "Government of the people, by the people, for the people."

Believing that "all men are created equal", Lincoln was a lifelong opponent of slavery, which was abolished under his leadership. He was assassinated in 1865.

POET OF THE PEOPLE

ROBERT Burns' birth in Alloway, Ayrshire, in 1759, came half a century before that of Abraham Lincoln. And the author of A Man's A Man For A' That died in 1796, aged 37, so the pair's lifespans did not overlap - yet their attitudes had much in common.

Credited as an influence on the Romantic movement and in the birth of socialism, Burns fell out of favour after becoming too vocal in his support for the French Revolution.

His final years were marked by ill-health and financial difficulties.

Related topic

- [Robert Burns](http://news.scotsman.com/topics.cfm?tid=162)
<http://news.scotsman.com/topics.cfm?tid=162>

This article: <http://news.scotsman.com/arts.cfm?id=627222007>

REVIEW

MASTERPIECE: 'MORTALITY' (1824) BY WILLIAM KNOX

With Death on His Mind

BY JOHN J. MILLER

ON THE EVENING of March 25, 1864, Abraham Lincoln sent his young son Tad to fetch a copy of Shakespeare's plays from the White House library. With the volume in hand, the president recited passages to an audience of one: Francis Bicknell Carpenter, a painter who was working on "First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation of President Lincoln," a portrait that now hangs in the Capitol.

After a while, Lincoln set down the book. "There is a poem that has been a great favorite with me for years," he said. Then he closed his eyes and declaimed 56 lines. He knew the words, but nothing else of the poem. "I would give a great deal," he said, "to know who wrote it, but I never could ascertain."

The author was William Knox and the title was "Mortality," though it was perhaps better known by its first line, "O why should the spirit of mortal be proud!" The theme is death, the great leveler that touches saints and sinners, kings and beggars, parents and children. Today, poet and poem would be almost entirely forgotten but for their connection to Lincoln.

Knox was born in Scotland in 1789. A descendant of John Knox, the 16th-century Protestant reformer, he showed a flair for verse at a young age but went into farming. He wasn't very good at it, possibly because he drank too much, and abandoned agriculture after five years. What he really wanted to do was write. His first collection of poems, "The Lonely Hearth," appeared in 1818. Two more followed: "The Songs of Israel," which includes "Mortality," in 1824 and "The Harp of Zion" in 1825.

The final book almost didn't see print. A publisher lost the manuscript, forcing Knox to spend several days re-writing its 65 poems in an impressive feat of recall. A few months later, Knox suffered a stroke and died at the age of 36. Sir Walter Scott eulogized him as "a young poet of considerable talent." Robert Southey, England's poet laureate at the time, also admired Knox.

Yet it was a former backwoodsman from the U.S. who kept Knox's words alive, helping the poet become a literary

one-hit wonder. In 1831, a friend handed the then 22-year-old Lincoln a copy of "Mortality," untitled and anonymous, probably clipped from a newspaper. Lincoln had good taste in poetry, reading and memorizing works by Robert Burns and Lord Byron as well as Shakespeare. The obscure "Mortality," however, became the poem he liked best. "I would give all I am worth and go into debt to be able to write so fine a piece as I think that is," he wrote in 1846.

"Mortality" contains 14 four-line stanzas of anapestic tetrameter, meaning that it advances in four beats of three syllables, two unstressed and one stressed. Like much of Knox's work, its inspiration comes from the Bible, in this case the Books of Job and Ecclesiastes. The latter observes that there is nothing new under the sun, which Knox refashions: "For we are the same things that our fathers have been / We see the same sights that our fathers have seen / We

drink the same stream, we feel the same sun / And we run the same course that our fathers have run."

The point of the poem is that death awaits all, regardless of station: "And the young and the old, and the low and the high / Shall moulder to dust, and together shall lie." Lincoln saw much of death. His mother died when he was a boy, his sister when he was a teenager, and Ann Rutledge, the love of his life before he met Mary Todd, when he was in his 20s. Two of his four sons died before him, and during the Civil War thousands of soldiers consecrated the grounds of Gettysburg and other battlefields.

Many Lincoln scholars have scoffed at "Mortality." David Herbert Donald dismissed it as "a tedious dirge." Ferenc Morton Szasz, who has written on

Lincoln's appreciation of Burns, called it "mediocre." Yet Lizzie MacGregor of the Scottish Poetry Library praises the poem's "simple vocabulary and easy rhythm," which made it "easier for the man on the street to absorb." Douglas L. Wilson, a Lincoln scholar, has written that it "served as an emotional tonic for a man subject to recurrent and virtually disabling melancholy." In time, its appeal may have deepened for the Great Emancipator. Death makes men equal: The low and the high included the black

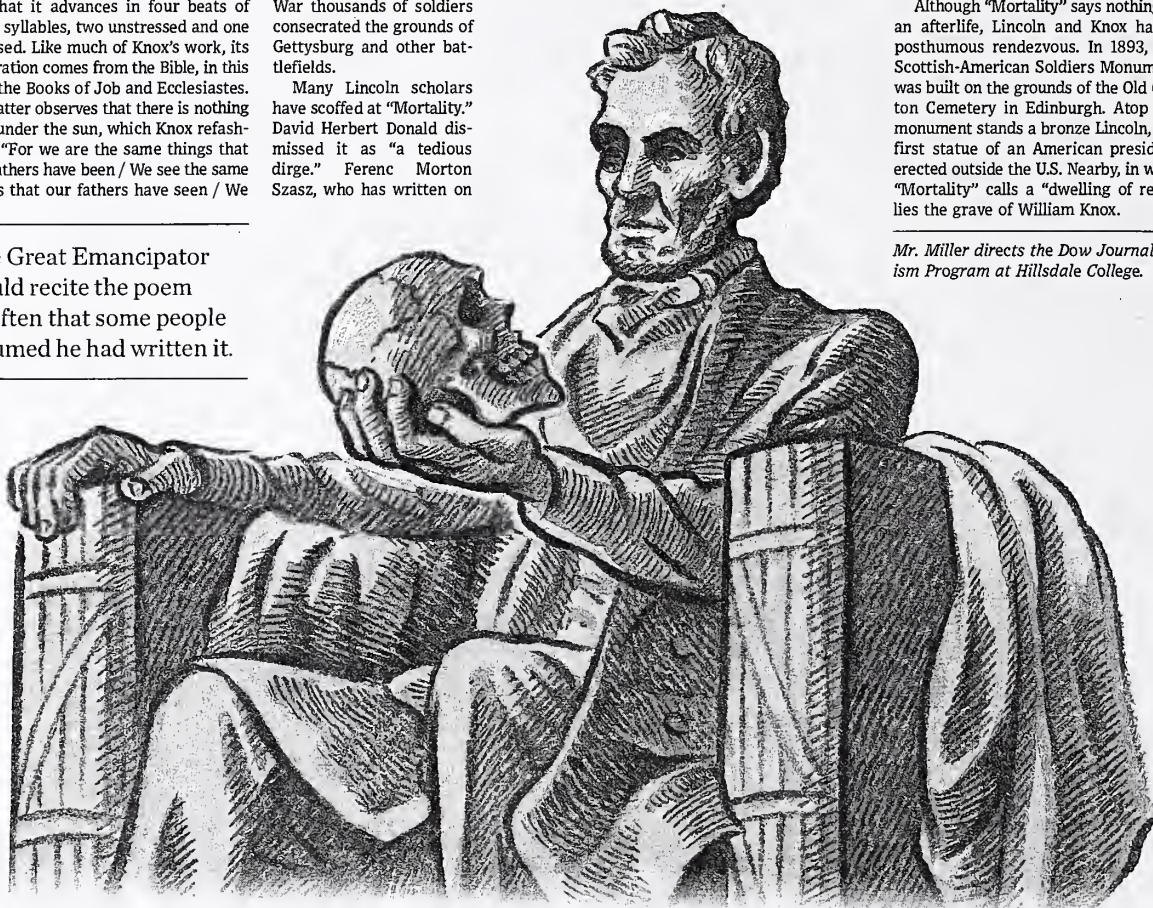
and the white.

Lincoln recited the poem so much that some people assumed he had written it. The president always corrected the mistake. One listener eventually recognized the lines. Gen. James Grant Wilson knew "Mortality" and sent a copy of Knox's collected works to Lincoln. What Lincoln thought of the Knox corpus, or if he even read it, is not known. One story, perhaps erroneous, claims that Lincoln performed "Mortality" a final time on April 15, 1865, just hours before his assassination.

Although "Mortality" says nothing of an afterlife, Lincoln and Knox had a posthumous rendezvous. In 1893, the Scottish-American Soldiers Monument was built on the grounds of the Old Calton Cemetery in Edinburgh. Atop the monument stands a bronze Lincoln, the first statue of an American president erected outside the U.S. Nearby, in what "Mortality" calls a "dwelling of rest," lies the grave of William Knox.

Mr. Miller directs the Dow Journalism Program at Hillsdale College.

The Great Emancipator would recite the poem so often that some people assumed he had written it.



David Gohard

Select Poetry.

THE following elegant poem was repeated to Mr. F. B. Carpenter, by the late President Lincoln a short time before his death. Mr. Lincoln stated that he had committed it to memory when a young man, but never knew who the author was :

Oh! Why Should the Spirit of Mortal be Proud?

Oh! why should the spirit of mortal be proud?
Like a swift, fleeting meteor, a fast flying cloud.
A flash of the lightning, a break of the wave,
He passeth from life to his rest in the grave.

The leaves of the oak and willow shall fade,
Be scattered around and together be laid -
And the young and the old, and the low and the high,
Shall moulder to dust and together shall lie.

The infant and mother attended and loved;
The mother that infant's affection who proved;
The husband that mother and infant who blessed,
Each, all, are away to their dwellings of rest.

The hand of the king that a sceptre hath borne;
The brow of the priest that the mitre hath worn;
The eye of the sage and the heart of the brave,
Are hidden and lost in the depths of the grave.

The peasant, whose lot was to sow and to reap;
The herdsman, who climbed with his goats up the steep;
The beggar who wandered in search of his bread,
Have faded away like the grass that we tread.

So the multitudes go, like the flower or the weed
That withers away to let others succeed;
So the multitude comes, even those we behold,
To repeat every tale that has often been told.

For we are the same that our fathers have been;
We see the same sights that our fathers have seen;
We drink the same stream and view the same sun,
And run the same course that our fathers have run.

The thoughts we are thinking our fathers would think;
From the death we are shrinking our fathers would shrink;
To the life we are clinging they also would cling,
But it speeds from us all, like a bird on the wing.

They loved, but the story we cannot unfold;
They scored, but the heart of the haughty is cold;
They grieved, but no wail from their slumber will come;
They joyed, but the tongue of their gladness is dumb.

They died; aye! they died; we, things that are now,
That walk on the turf that lies over their brow,
And make in their dwellings a transient abode,
Meet the things that they met on their pilgrimage road.

Yea! hope and despondency, pleasure and pain,
We mingle together in sunshine and rain;
And the smile and the tear, the song and the dirge,
Still follow each other, like surge upon surge.

'Tis the wink of an eye, 'tis the draught of a breath,
From the blossom of health to the paleness of death;
From the gilded saloon to the bier and the shroud,
Oh! why should the spirit of mortal be proud?



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2012 with funding from
Friends of The Lincoln Collection of Indiana, Inc.

<http://archive.org/details/abrahamlincolnrepoelinc>

